BLEST BE THE TIE

October 28, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 5:1-12
Hebrews 11:1-3, 13, 12:1-2

"Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." -Hebrews 12:1 (NRSV)

Robert Shaw, who is a poet and a professor of English at Mt. Holyoke, has described his formative memories of church and religion in a way that sounded familiar to me and which may cause you to smile in recognition as well. He was writing an essay in a wonderful new collection entitled Incarnation, Contemporary Writers on the New Testament. Mr. Shaw's assignment was to write on the Book of Hebrews.

> "My mother's father was a Presbyterian minister, and until I was four my parents, my brother and I lived with my grandparents next to the church. We spent a lot of time there perforce. My first impressions of Christian worship were vividly sensory in ways that my age would explain. Parents attempting to make small boys look proper for Sunday dressed them in suits with short pants then, and I remember how the cushions of the pews, stuffed with horsehair, prickled my legs as they dangled above the floor. Sitting next to my grandmother I would look at the stained glass or the people around us, most of whom seemed very old. The white-haired ladies, always wearing hats, all knew my name, although I could never tell them apart. They carried large pocketbooks, which were black in the winter and white in the summer, and out of which came lavender-scented handkerchiefs, change purses, spectacles, peppermints and much else. My grandmother had her own supply of peppermints which she doled out to me if I seemed restless." [p. 268]

What Mr. Shaw is writing about is the Communion of Saints. In particular he is reflecting on the intriguing image in the 12th chapter of Hebrews:

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us."

When he hears that phrase, "cloud of witnesses," Mr. Shaw thinks "mostly of my grandfather and others of that generation of my family, of those old ladies with their pocketbooks, whose names I will never know, and of many more." [p. 280]

Mr. Shaw's reflections prompted my own reminiscences which is what he intended of course, including short pants and peppermints and scented handkerchiefs and stained glass and dear people who knew my name even though I did not and do not know theirs - except for Mrs. Crawford who sat in the pew immediately in front of us and who was responsible for one of the profound insights in my life, a moment of pure revelation. Mrs. Crawford wore a fox wrap of some sort in the winter. The fox's head, complete with open eyes, teeth visible - clamped around his own tail, was part of the garment. And when we settled in for the sermon and Mrs. Crawford slung her wrap over her shoulder, there he was staring at me for twenty or thirty minutes... a real fox, that rascal who loomed large and ferocious, in so many childhood stories, actually very small, manageable almost even by my modest standards. He and I spent a lot of time staring each other down.

Mr. Shaw, the poet, suggests that the "cloud of witnesses" in the 12th chapter of Hebrews includes Mrs. Crawford and maybe even her fox. Psychologically he's correct. We are influenced by many people whose identities are long forgotten. We are indebted to parents, family, friends, a widening circle of people whose lives intersected with ours and who in one way or another, positively or negatively, had a profound impact on us.

Theologically he's right as well. Religious faith is shaped, to a great extent, by relationships, communities. It has been said that there is no such thing as a solitary Jew or Christian because you need the community. God calls, not just individuals, but individuals who are to be "the people." Jesus calls disciples into a new community. After three years of early ministry, what Jesus leaves behind are not just isolated individuals here and there, but a community... the church.

Communities are health giving. Jean Vanier, founder of the l'Arche Communities in France which care for mentally handicapped adults in the context of a religious community writes:

> "There are times when together we discover that we make up a single body, that we belong to each other and that God has called us together as a source of life for each other." [Weavings, July/August 1990]

The idea is that we become more in relationship than we are in isolation. And furthermore that human communities, even the smallest and most modest, have generative and healing and life-giving power. Everybody has a church, someone observed; whether or not you belong to the institution. Everyone has a small group of people - maybe only one other - with whom you share joys and sorrows, whose presence affirms and supports

you, whose company you seek. When someone you love dies, the hands of that community begin to reach out to you to touch and to gather you in. When your grandchild is born, it is to these people you bring the pictures. "A church within a church" it has been called...realistically acknowledging that in a large, diverse, urban congregation like this one, not everyone can be connected to everyone else...

Group therapy, a family reunion, coffee together, a phone call once a week... the religious word for it is Communion; the creedal designation is "Communion of Saints." The Biblical image is that "cloud of witnesses" which surrounds each of us.

You don't have to be saintly to get into that cloud of witnesses. "Saintly" has come to mean pious or a paragon of moral virtue. "She's a saint," "he's no saint," are moral descriptions, ordinarily. Originally "saintly" didn't mean that at all. The writer of the Book of Hebrews was addressing a community of Christians in the First Century who were facing almost certain persecution and who were not at all certain that they were strong enough to endure. Some of them were going to suffer, be arrested, maybe tortured, executed. So instead of admonition, the writer calls the role of heroes and heroines from the past; men and women who were faithful against all the odds and in the midst of some very frightening circumstances. That's who's in the cloud of witnesses for you he told them: You aren't alone! Noah and Abraham and Sarah and Moses and Gideon and David and Samuel are with you... and Rahab the harlot!

Just in case you are thinking that only saintly people get into the communion of saints, there's Rahab, a prostitute whose clients one day include two Israelite spies who are on a reconnaissance mission in Jericho for Joshua, but end up at Rahab's establishment and she hides them from the authorities and thus plays a major role in Joshua's successful campaign against Jericho. Rahab the Saint. Rahab who was faithful by doing what she had to do when she had to do it. Rahab whose presence in the cloud of witnesses encourages us to see that there are many people there who were our enablers, our supporters, whose timely faithfulness is somehow and in some way responsible for our being here. Karl Barth said God commandeers people for sainthood.

At the time of the Reformation the new Protestant Church discontinued the tradition of canonizing saints. And so there are no official saints in Protestantism as there are in the Roman Catholic tradition. The Reformers hoped to recover this very ancient notion of the Communion of Saints.

But what actually happened throughout Western culture was a radical individualism which in some ways was and is directly counter to the notion of community, communion of saints. Instead of celebrating the life-giving potential of community, we have celebrated the good of individual autonomy, independence. It has served us well sometimes. It has fostered individual initiation and responsibility. But sometimes the results have not been so attractive. The deterioration of life in some urban areas is, it has been suggested, a result of individualism run amok. Our inability and unwillingness to take care of our poor and weak and helpless, from infants whose mortality rate is appalling to the homeless elderly, whose presence

on our streets, sick, eating out of garbage cans, cold, unable to cope... results from a radical individualism that will not acknowledge corporate responsibility for anything. And a political impasse between left and right, both absolutely committed to the entitlements and rights of the individual, has left the middle nearly empty and the system incapable therefore, for the time being, of leading the nation, the community.

So this precious notion is timely and critical; this old notion that no one of us is an island; this lovely suggestion that we are in this together, that there is life in togetherness and furthermore that each of us is surrounded by a cloud of witnesses...

Of course there are saints. They are the ones who point the way. They are the ones whose lives are transparent to something else, something larger, said Paul Tillich. Saints are those who point sometimes to something in us that we could not see in ourselves.

In his autobiography, Frederich Buechner tells about writing a florid, over-blown essay at prep school and being stunned when Mr. Martin, the teacher, gave him an unheard of 100%. "I think it is not too much to say that from that moment on, I knew that what I wanted to be more than anything else was a writer. Mr. Martin may just have changed the whole course of my life with that preposterous grade." [The Sacred Journey, p. 74]

Your saints pointed the way by having confidence in you, by aspiring much for you, by giving you opportunities, and most of all by showing you strength and resolve and competence in yourself that without them you never would have discovered. Sometimes your saints jolted you. Sometimes a saint has to be pushy and almost rude, sometimes uncompromising in expectation of you and hope for you.

And sometimes by example your saints showed you how to live; showed you how to believe, how to trust, how to love and forgive, how to weep and laugh, how to be a Christian.

Before the Reformation, All Saints' Day was November 1, a busy, festive and increasingly profitable occasion. Pilgrims flocked to the churches to see and perhaps touch the relics of the saints. Visiting in British cathedrals you can see places on ancient tombs, worn smooth by the touch of the pilgrims. Noblemen had collections of relics, bones for instance, vials of Mary's milk, a tattered piece of Jesus' robe, and, for a fee, put them on display on All Saints' Day. It was the excesses that prompted the Reformers to eliminate the notion from the new, reformed church. Halloween, by the way, is a derivative of All Hallows' Eve, the night before All Saints' Day, when the spirits of the dead are out and about.

But of course there are saints. And on All Saints' Day it's a good idea to identify them and acknowledge their presence in that cloud of witnesses and to thank them. "Mentally populate your own cloud of witnesses," Robert Shaw urges us. Do it today - over lunch - identify your saints. Better yet, take a quiet moment and write out their names...

- The elementary teacher who recognized something in you and would not let you go.

- The scout leader who helped you learn that even your twelve-year-old fingers could function and actually tie a clove hitch.

- The coach who caught you accepting mediocrity in yourself and insisted that you had more to give physically than you had ever given to anything and therefore didn't know was there.

- The friend who accepted you and overlooked your foibles and stood with you and showed you what loyalty is, or the friend who stepped in and fought a fight that was yours and taught you courage.

- The parent who taught you to share and to be strong and to be brave and to forgive.

- The dear ones who knew your name and called you by name and gave you an identity.

- And later, the precious ones who showed you how to be vulnerable and not so strong, how to be sick and how to die.

There is for each of us a great cloud of witnesses. I like to think of them as a cheering section, full of faces we knew and loved, faces of people we have admired from afar and whose example has given us strength, and faces of people we never knew at all but whose lives continue in ours - great, great, great grandparents, professional predecessor, politicians and poets and generals and reformers - Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Abraham Lincoln and John Calvin and Martin Luther, Joan of Arc, Francis of Assisi, Julian of Norwich, Peter and Mary and Martha and Jesus: they're in that cloud too, that cheering section, pulling for you.

We affirm something of all of that today - this Sunday before All Saints'Day. This occasion when we dedicate for the use of this community of faith books which will be used in worship for a long time to come. Many of the Bibles and Hymnals are dedicated to the memory of specific people. They contain, like the Book of Hebrews, the names of the saints... and those names will remind us, every time we use the books, of our indebtedness to the past and the fact that when we gather here to sing God's praise, and to hear God's word, the great cloud of witnesses is here too.

On a hot Sunday afternoon every August there was a family reunion. In this particular extended family my own was out on the edge. The only time I saw those people was on that inevitably hot Sunday afternoon. When it came time to eat, and all the dishes of baked beans and baked corn and meatloaf and jello salad and fried chicken stretched out on the picnic table, the family was called to order by an old man, a retired Methodist lay preacher who told us who had died and who had been born during the year and then prayed a very long prayer which included the ones who had died and the ones who had been born and the cousins and uncles fighting the wars,

and of course, the grace before the meal. And then we sang a ~~hymn~~ which everybody knew even without having the words in front of them. It's not very strong music as hymn tunes go and the tune was not in the old Hymnal. But it's in the new one, and it seemes fitting to me, on the Sunday before All Saints' Day and the occasion when, on the dedication of Bible and Hymnal, we find ourselves looking both backward and forward, to sing together about the Communion of Saints, that great cloud of witnesses, who in God's eternal love are still with us, still cheer us on, still hold us up in love and confidence.

"Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love:
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

And it is. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Insert # 2 (Conclusion)

10/28/90